Half a century ago, I toured the Beinecke Library in New Haven. Walking between two ranges of books, the guard remarked, for no apparent reason, that after reading Barnaby Rudge Edgar Allan Poe exclaimed, “I can write a better raven than Dickens!” Pausing, the guard turned and said, “And here is the original raven.” There on a shelf stood Grip, Dickens’s own pet, stuffed and preserved in a wooden box, staring out with a black glass eye.

What went unmentioned was the pile of seventeen steamer trunks, each bound in twine with sealed knots, lying between two basement elevators. These mysterious, unlabeled trunks were surrounded by the fog of forbidden knowledge that gathers about the surviving blocks of Plato’s Academy and the ruins of the ruins of Palmyra. At last I had the courage to ask. They contained Ezra Pound’s papers, awaiting the end of a lawsuit over ownership.

Among the books and manuscripts within those trunks lay notebooks kept by a Massachusetts art historian who, at the end of the nineteenth century, had recorded his sessions with two scholars of classical Chinese poetry. Ernest Fenollosa had graduated from Harvard and at twenty-five begun
teaching at the University of Tokyo. Before he was forty, he had risen to the post of curator of Asian art at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Following his divorce and a lightning remarriage to his assistant, herself a divorcée, he lost his position—Boston society disapproved. It’s the stuff of The Age of Innocence. The Fenollosas moved to Japan.

Patience is a virtue, but to a writer impatience often a necessity. Ezra Pound’s ambition to reform English verse began crudely and absurdly in poems of some late-to-the-party jongleur who hadn’t read much past Chaucer. That medieval jingling and clanking persisted a long while (“What thou loveth well remains,/ the rest is dross”), but it became more an affection than an affectation of style. In his early years, in Italy and then London, he wrote poems in gouts and published books rapid-fire: A Lume Spento (1908), A Quinzaine for This Yule (1908), Personae (1909), Exultations (1909), Canzoni (1911), The Sonnets and Ballate of Guido Cavalcanti (1912), Ripostes (1912), and Des Imagistes (1914, editor), all before Cathay (1915). A man on the make, he was making his way—Pound learned on the fly, as brilliant poets often do. When he collected his early verse in Personae (1926), a year after turning forty, he dropped over a hundred scraps of juvenilia, if juvenilia includes the verse of early middle-age. He’d have needed to drop many more to purge his beginnings of all the pretensions of style that had made him a goad, and a joke, to critics.

The notebooks of Chinese glosses and paraphrases lying among Fenollosa’s manuscripts helped change English poetry. Without them, Pound might not have pursued the new style that made free verse, rather than some idiot grandchild of Martin Farquhar Tupper and Walt Whitman, a change of sensibility that used modern language for a modern world. Imagism, the movement he founded on the hop, was in flight by the time he published “A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste” in the March 1913 issue of Poetry. Whether Imagism drew him to the Chinese poetry or the poetry deeper into Imagism is unclear, but Imagism was embodied in Cathay. Pound discovered how to put the shimmer of the real into Modernist verse, and other poets took note.

A writer’s life has moments of pure good fortune, and good usually means undeserved.

Pound already had a leaning toward the Far East, having begun to write haiku probably the spring after his arrival in London in 1908, having joined a breakaway group from the Poets’ Club. Japonisme was not quite dead. He first drafted “In a Station of the Metro,” one of the first glimmers of Modernist poetry, soon after visiting Paris in 1911. Its relation to classic haiku is as striking as it is obvious, though he measured the lines to a form quite different. In the fall of 1913, Pound had placed a series of poems in Poetry by his friend Allen Upward. Pound wrote his wife, Dorothy, “The chinese things . . . are worth the price of admission.”

On the way I saw the parrots of dusty crimson feathers wrangling over a piece of flesh, but on account of the perfume of thy scented billet I was unable to hear their screams.

A potter, who was creating the world, threw from him what seemed to him a useless lump of clay, and found that he had thrown away his left hand.

When the delicious verses of Li Po were praised in the Court of Heaven an envious mandarin complained of the poet’s scandalous life. The Divine Emperor, who was walking in his garden, held out a
rose and asked him, “Do you smell the gardener’s manure?”

Upward hadn’t taken the poems from Chinese—he’d just made them up. The mystique of China began to infect Pound’s verse before he possessed any decent knowledge of the real thing.

During this period of musing about the Orient, Pound met Mary, Ernest Fenollosa’s widow. Pound’s friend Laurence Binyon, then Assistant Keeper of the Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum, arranged the occasion. Not long after Pound came to London, Binyon had shown him Japanese ukiyo-e prints from the museum’s extensive collection. The meeting with Mrs. Fenollosa in September 1913, when the Upward poems had just been published, went well. She apparently told Pound of her husband’s deep interest in the poetry of ancient and medieval China. Pound must quickly have boned up on the subject, because soon he had so impressed her that in December she handed him most of Fenollosa’s remaining notes and manuscripts, saying, as he recalled almost half a century later, “You’re the only person who can finish this stuff the way Ernest wanted.”

Pound found among those papers Fenollosa’s record of his close examination of classical Chinese poetry. The American poet at first immersed himself editing Fenollosa’s translations and analysis of Noh plays, published as Certain Noble Plays of Japan (1916) and “Noh” or Accomplishment (1916). It took nearly a year for Pound to get round to the poetry. Fenollosa, who had little or no classical Chinese himself, had studied the poems in 1899 with Mori Kainan, perhaps the most important kanshi poet of the day—that is, a Japanese poet who wrote in classical Chinese. (Three years earlier, Fenollosa had a less accomplished teacher, Hirai Kinza, whose errors in reading Chinese look embarrassing now. Pound drew on Hirai’s cribs for only one poem, so his misadventures are almost irrelevant to Cathay.)

As Mori’s English was poor, and Fenollosa’s Japanese probably not advanced, an expert in both, the professor of international law Ariga Nagao, was employed as a translator. Also fluent in classical Chinese, he prepared the crib for one of the most important poems in the book, “Song of the Bowmen of Shu.” Mori and Ariga used what is called the kundoku method of reading and translating. This is Timothy Billings’s quite remarkable discovery in this extraordinary edition of Cathay.1 Kundoku allowed scholars who couldn’t speak Chinese, who could pronounce the characters only in the Japanese fashion, to read the texts closely. This is reminiscent of the study of Latin in the West, where for centuries the texts were pored over by students and scholars who sometimes could not speak the language and whose pronunciation would undoubtedly have driven ancient Romans mad—though ancient Romans in their polyglot city were used to foreigners mangling their tongue and delighted in making nasty remarks about it.

Most of the poems that drew Pound’s interest were by Li Bo, one of the most beloved of Tang poets. (Until fairly recently he was called Li Po in English; but Pound knew him as Rihaku, his Japanese name. The change came after the Chinese adoption of the Pinyin system, which, for example, altered Peking to Beijing.) Pound believed that all the Chinese poems in Cathay were Li Bo’s, though three were by others. Transmission of the mostly eighth-century
poems, borrowed from an eighteenth-century anthology, proceeded through this “gloss-reading.” Mori, the editor believes, would first read a line in Sino-Japanese pronunciation. (Sometimes the old Tang dynasty pronunciation had frozen sounds later altered in Mandarin, keeping ancient rhymes that could otherwise no longer be heard.) After reading the line, Mori would gloss the Chinese characters one by one. Ariga would render each gloss in English while Fenollosa jotted it down. Having moved through the whole poem, Mori would return to the beginning and parse each line, the paraphrases sometimes differing significantly from, even contradicting, the word-by-word gloss. Context alters sense. Mori would add notes on allusion, history, and technique, and again Ariga would translate and Fenollosa serve as amanuensis.

The intensity of the method suggests as much about the Japanese study of classical Chinese poetry as the finicky care and self-corrections about the teaching itself. Pound, however, rarely saw the Chinese originals and often favored the glosses over the paraphrases, which gave him dangerous leeway. Most of his errors, where there were errors, came because he never realized that the glosses were not translations per se, just potentials sometimes rejected in the paraphrase. A translator, kun-reading Prospero’s “And rifted Jove’s stout oak/ With his own bolt,” might have glossed “bolt” as: “short arrow/ discharge of lightning/ sudden spring or start/ act of gorging food.” One can imagine what Pound would have done with that.

The method is best illustrated by one of the short poems, perhaps that most frequently anthologized, “The Jewel Stairs’ Grievance.” I have skipped the Sino-Japanese pronunciations, so what lie below are Mori’s gloss readings, his paraphrase (both as translated by Ariga), then, in brackets, Pound’s later translation.
Gloss and paraphrase were followed by Mori’s long note:

Gioku kai [the poem’s first two ideographs] means here—a place where court ladies are living, one of the imperial mistresses. The subject of the poem is that one of them was waiting in vain for the lord to come. The beauty of the poem lies in not a single character being used to express the idea of waiting + resenting; yet the poem is full of them—the idea. This is how. Thinking that the lord will come, she was coming out to meet him at the entrance, a flight of steps ornamented with jewels. She was standing there till the very dewiness of night wets her stockings. She lets down her curtain already despairing of his coming. And yet she can see the moon shining so brightly outside, and had to think of the possibility of the lord’s still coming, because it is so fine a night; and so passes the whole night awake.

Given the slight clumsiness and halting character of the English, the lines are no doubt more or less verbatim from Ariga. Pound was drawn to poems whose meaning could be worked out only through implicit suggestion. Indeed, his attraction to Chinese poetry was, beyond what in 1911 he called “Luminous Detail,” the demand placed on the reader to detect what lay beneath the surface. Hints become wholes. He remarked about the poem in his later essay “Chinese Poetry,” “You can play Conan Doyle if you like.” Pound appended his own note in Cathay.

Note.—Jewel stairs, therefore a palace. Grievance, therefore there is something to complain of. Gauze stockings, therefore a court lady, not a servant who complains. Clear autumn, therefore he has no excuse on account of weather. Also she has come early, for the dew has not merely whitened the stairs, but has
soaked her stockings. The poem is especially prized because she utters no direct reproach.

This is the only note of any length in Cathay.

Largely ignorant of Chinese culture and art, without Fenollosa’s notebooks Pound could never have penetrated the sense of a poem relying so much on gesture and custom. Billings observes, “The Jewel Stairs’ Grievance” was “based on one of the ancient topics for folk tunes, the ‘palace complaint.’” A Yuan Dynasty scholar commented, “There is not a single character expressing resentment, yet we see the idea of hidden resentment between the lines.”

The final sentence of Pound’s note seems to show uncanny intuition—though it’s merely a paraphrase of Mori’s “the beauty of the poem lies in not a single character being used to express the idea of waiting + resenting.” One of the themes of this critical edition is how mistaken many scholars were in finding just such Holmesian deductions throughout Cathay—yet here Pound does go further than his source. Mori never mentions a palace, does not associate gauze stockings with court ladies, does not say the clear skies deny the tardy lover any excuse, and does not infer that the lady has come early. Pound shows what he elsewhere has wrongly been given credit for, the power of deduction.

The editor’s notes make clear how much was lost in the Chinese whispers from scholar to translator to Fenollosa to Pound. The “jewel stairs,” for instance, were jade steps, though according to Billings they would have been marble. The Chinese word for jade meant “jewel” in Japanese. Japanese borrowed numerous Chinese words during the Tang period, and sometimes meanings gradually changed. “Sudare,” one of the few Japanese words in the glosses (a sign that Fenollosa had some Japanese), meant bamboo curtain or screen. If lowered, then a curtain, the precise translation of the Chinese character. (“Crystal” probably meant “beaded,” the word Billings uses in translating an earlier poem by Xie Tiao. I’d wonder if it didn’t mean watered silk, crystalline by moonlight, were moiré not the invention of a later day.)

There were many classes of error for which the kundoku method and the men involved stand responsible. Many things could have gone wrong in the daisy chain of such transmission. As Murphy’s Law demands, in Cathay they did. The corruptions in modern Japanese of classical Chinese words are more than matched by blunders of the translators, mishearings by Fenollosa, and misreadings by Pound—and then the dozens of places where Pound, mistaken or not, mucks with the original for a stronger poetic effect.

Among the most famous of Mori’s and Ariga’s lapses was translating the Chinese characters for “elephant (ivory) bow” (a bow, as Billings notes, merely “decorated at both tips with ivory”) as “ivory edge of arrow.” The faulty paraphrase that followed became Pound’s “the generals have ivory arrows.” Later, in one of the Chinese poems he added to Lustra (1916), “ridge beam” becomes “tile,” the result of a false friend in Japanese. Similarly, the Chinese word qing marked off a range of color from blue to black, picking up along the way, as one scholar put it, “cerulean, azure, perse, leek-green, peacock-blue, cyaneous, bice, verdigris,” among others. The word in
Japanese generally meant “blue,” and so it was glossed and paraphrased. This gave Pound reason enough for blue grass, blue willow-tips, unripe blue plums, and a blue gate. He could have driven a herd of blue cows through one poem, though he rejected the idea. It’s odd that Mori did not consider the oddity of it all.

These are missteps, certainly; but they led to effects difficult to quarrel with. The gear of generals might well be, like General Patton’s ivory-handled Colt .45s, expensive, unlikely, even dandyish. Flamboyance is recognition of power. It’s not even clear what an ivory arrow would be—an ivory shaft would have been almost impossible to manufacture (elephant tusks have too much curvature). An ivory point could be sharp but, because lighter, far less penetrating than bronze. Ivory arrows are unknown, so far as I can discover. Other inventions, however, compensate for qualities in the Chinese line lost in translation—inaccuracies may repair what’s missing.

Pound has been the lightning rod for those who despise the school of Imitation, the weak little brother in Dryden’s genealogy of translation. Every method has its exemplar, and Pound showed all that imitation could do that paraphrase and paraphrase could not. He’s also responsible for the wild liberties that followed from translators far less gifted. In the end, Pound’s fancies led to Christopher Logue dragging Uzis, helicopters, and spaghetti shoulder-straps onto the Trojan battlefield.

Fenollosa sometimes found Ariga’s English difficult, though fortunately the mistakes had little effect. The American’s handwriting was a greater problem. Thomas Pynchon once remarked, by way of apology for appalling stretches of dialogue in his early work, that he suffered from a malady known as Bad Ear. Many editors—perhaps most recently that of The Notebooks of Robert Frost—have torn out their hair struggling with the scrawl of some long-dead worthy afflicted with Bad Hand. Fortunately, Fenollosa managed to correct the worst, so Pound was not stranded in the middle of translation wondering what “ship’s intestines” were. Fenollosa had fortunately emended it to “sheeps’ [sic] intestines.”

Fenollosa’s penmanship, though a little better than Frost’s, is full of snares, particularly with short words lacking context. One of the scholar’s most crippling vanities is hubris—and that Pound lived in such vanity is no reason for critics to follow him. Billings takes forgivable pleasure pointing out the stumbles of poet and scholar alike. Pound, for example, probably read “from the West” as “for the West” (and Hugh Kenner later as “further West”), dispatching the poem’s traveler in the wrong direction. “Sitting” became “fill full”; “outsiders,” “outriders”; “housegates,” “banquets”; and, in a stunning act of misprision, “to no purport,” “howl portents,” allowing Pound to invent the delightful but errant line, “For them the yellow dogs howl portents in vain.” Some misreadings may have been bumbling accidents, others deliberate—Billings is smart not to play umpire.

Do these instances matter? Most do not. One exotic detail can be much like another, so far as effect is concerned. Mori paraphrased the opening line of “The River Song” as “A (fine) boat of shato wood, with sides of mokuran,” glossing “moku ran” as magnolia. Pound, ever looking for the
concrete detail—one of his demands in “A Few Don’ts”—translated the line, “This boat is of shato-
wood, and its gunwales are cut magnolia.” “Gunwales” is a nice touch, acting like darkroom
fixative. Unfortunately, there’s a rat’s nest of error here. Mori thought shato very like the long-
lived flowering tree resembling an elm; instead, it’s a pear whose wood is as water-repellent as
teah. Worse, though early commentaries, as Billings notes, proposed conflicting glosses of “side of
a boat” and “oars” for the middle character of the line, scholars for the past thousand years have
leaned toward “oars.” Whether the boat’s sides or oars are made of magnolia may be crucial to the
sailor, not so much to an audience with no idea what shato wood or moku ran is. The exoticism is
what sells the line. Pound’s makeshift shifting works, so long as you don’t try to set out to sea
using his instructions. (Perhaps it wouldn’t matter even then. I shall have to ask a Tang boat
builder.)

Last, we have the wrenching contrivances of Pound’s translations themselves, rich and astonishing
in some ways, bastardizing in others, sometimes both at once. (If anyone was willing to abuse
poetic license for the master touch, it was Pound.) He was guilty of appalling acts of
ignorance—not knowing the Chinese ideogram for “river,” he invented the “River Kiang,” that is,
the “River River.” Billings implies that putting the name of a river last is unknown in modern
American English. Not in Boston, where the River Charles is still sometimes referred to. Such
names—River Hudson, River Potomac—were once common, probably vanishing only toward the
end of the nineteenth century, along with constructions like “Washington City” and the “City of
Mexico.”

Pound treated gloss and paraphrase as equals—elsewhere in “The River-Merchant’s Wife: A
Letter,” he combined the characters for “ride on,” “bamboo,” and “horse” with the paraphrase,
“When you came riding on bamboo stilts,” to cobble together the suggestive line “You came by on
bamboo stilts, playing horse.” I’ve always found the line mystifying, apparently with good reason.
The Chinese characters for “bamboo horse”—that is, a hobby horse—were borrowed by the
Japanese for “bamboo stilts.” Mori’s paraphrase was simply wrong. Pound’s bullheaded ignorance
was at other times a poetic advantage when he muddled gloss and paraphrase into brilliance.
Cathay would lack many of the most affecting lines had he been more cautious, more austere.

S. Eliot said that Pound was the “inventor of Chinese poetry for our time.” Pound’s genius
was, not to be in the right place at the right time, but to make time and place right for him.
What he did for Chinese poetry, and translation as a whole, perhaps could have been done sooner
or later; but he sensed that by inaccuracy he could sniff poetry out. No one more stringent has
managed to suggest the depth and intimacy of the original. What’s lost in translation can never be
found—but Pound’s method, however cranky and conniving, made Tang-era poetry again a living
art. The rasps and chisels he took to Mori’s paraphrases show his extraordinary eye for editing—a
decade later, he took the junk heap of The Waste Land drafts and saw within, as Michelangelo did
in a naked block of marble, the figure struggling to get out.

Perhaps the most interesting poem in Cathay is not Chinese at all. Years before, Pound had
translated “The Seafarer,” one of the Anglo-Saxon poems rescued in the Vercelli codex, a rare survivor of dozens or hundreds of Old English poems now lost. The manuscript, copied by a scribe during the latter half of the tenth century, has been housed in the Biblioteca Capitolare in Vercelli for nearly a thousand years. Pound translated the poem by taking down from the shelf his college Anglo-Saxon textbook, often employing the glossary, as Billings recounts, the way he later did the glosses of Mori and Ariga—that is, as a tray of sweets. Pound lopped off the last two dozen lines of the poem as later Christian “guesses and ‘improvements.’” (The debate over the affinity of the secular and homiletic passages, begun before he was born, is still alive.)

Pound’s translation was published in The New Age in 1911, three years before he began work on Cathay. His method was to imitate the two-beat hemistichs and alliterative line of Anglo-Saxon poetry. The transformation sometimes wanders off the path of Old English meaning, yet what emerged was the most convincing imitation of antique style in modern translation:

May I for my own self song’s truth reckon,

Journey’s jargon, how I in harsh days

Hardship endured oft.

Bitter breast-cares have I abided,

Known on my keel many a care’s hold,

And dire sea-surge, and there I oft spent

Narrow nightwatch nigh the ship’s head

While she tossed close to cliffs. Coldly afflicted,

My feet were by frost benumbed.

Thus begins ninety-nine lines of translation in “thud metre” (as Berryman said of Lowell’s early poems) with rat-a-tat alliteration that never lets up and English syntax pretzel-twisted into the appearance of antiquity. Pound’s willful way with meaning used approximation, distortion, and genial fraud. Among other things, “song’s truth” would more accurately be rendered “truth-song” or “true tale”; “reckon,” “express”; “jargon,” “narrate” or “relate.” A case can be made for all these leaps of faith. (Billings is meticulous in marking Pound’s nods and winks.) The flights of fancy elsewhere might on occasion make a strict constructionist drop dead, but the performance remains a tour de force. It’s a pity Pound didn’t pursue the manner through, say, “The Battle of Brunanburh,” the “Finnsburg Fragment,” and a long section of Beowulf. His contortions are rarely overly gymnastic and never outright crazy—he uses of “benumbed” for “bound, fettered” and the hoary word “scur” for “showers” are fine examples of archaizing.

One method Pound used to striking effect, to the horror of translators with a theological belief in accuracy, was the calque, that is, literal but unidiomatic translation—or, even
better, “exotically literal translation,” as Billings puts it. What he terms “concocted calques” (“deliberately unidiomatic phrases . . . that create the illusion of ‘faithful’ translation”) can be devastating in creating tone or mood. Often this was done to make a plain phrase florid or vivid: “trees fall,” in Li Bo’s “Lament of the Frontier Guard,” instead of “trees drop leaves”; or, in “The Seafarer,” “Caesars” for “cāseras” the latter meaning just “emperors.”

A more radical method, which Billings calls “homophonic substitution,” willfully uses the often accidental similarities between words. Pound was a prodigy at this, though his translations have been attacked by those who think local shifts and dodges can never serve the whole. The dark shelves of dull translations of Beowulf and its blood cousins argue otherwise.

Homophonic substitution, evident everywhere in Pound’s version of “The Seafarer,” shows how far he was willing to stray from the original to make a deviant, theatrical version, literal sense be damned, or at least darned. The editor’s notes, as full and gratifying as I can imagine, reveal in fine detail how such a poet uses his talent—and why great translations almost always come from the desk of a poet. There are places in “The Seafarer” where Pound simply nudges the original (“benumbed” for gebunden [“bound, fettered”]; “care’s hold” for cearselda [“cares throne/abode”—and what a splendid sailor’s pun on ship’s hold!) while keeping the roughneck Anglo-Saxon manner, often tucking in a layer of meaning beneath the literal. In this tale about sailing through miserable, icy weather (or sailing through figurative seas toward doctrinal shores), he sometimes cuts more deeply into Anglo-Saxon than mirror translation could.

I might cross broadswords with the editor just once, over his note to the hemistich Pound renders as “Corn of the coldest.” The full thought is “hægl f ēoll on eorþan,/ corna caldast” (“Hail fell on earth,/ the coldest of grains”). Billings comments, “Pound was probably thinking of the general archaic sense of ‘corn’ as a ‘small hard particle, a grain, as of sand or salt.’ ” Possibly—but he might have been recalling corn, not in the English sense (that is, wheat or oat grain), but as dried American corn (maize), which would very much resemble pellets of hail.

Classical translation often requires a poetic swerve in order to exist simultaneously as an original frustratingly opaque to readers and a counterfeit shining as boldly as the source did to those who first heard it recited or sung. The translator becomes a persona, both guardian of the temple and collector of night soil—Pound was a man of many masks. A reader who disapproves of his tools may still admire his reckless daring. The startling thing is how frequently his feints and niggles can be justified.

Where Pound goes astray, rendering “There storms beat on the stone cliffs, there the icy-feathered sea-swallow answered them” as “Storms, on the stone-cliffs beaten, fell on the stern/In icy feathers,” the warping seems almost forgivable if we recall that “stearn” or “stern” was an Anglo-Saxon name for the tern (sea swallow). Exaction comes at the cost of good poetry—to please the professor, you must plug your ears with wax. Even Pound’s famous howler, turning “cities” into “berries,” can be defended. Billings ably lays out the evidence. (The Anglo-Saxon words were “byrig” and “bērige”—Pound’s glossary was misleading.) The poet’s substitution of “English” for
“angels” (englum) has less to recommend it, except as part of his scheme to cleanse the poem of what some have felt to be Christian mangling. Sam Johnson said of a now obscure translation of Aeschylus, “We must try its effect as an English poem; that is the way to judge of the merit of a translation.” Had the Great Panjandrum been born later, he might have been speaking of Pound’s Cathay.

The scholars who had no access to the Fenollosa papers, or who apparently saw them and did not know what they’d seen, do not get off lightly. Billings, his knowledge of Chinese and paleography in full feather, can afford to have a little fun with academics who overestimated their skills.

If no less a scholar than Ronald Bush transcribed “drum” as “dream” because he didn’t know that the word being glossed was gu (drum), and no less a scholar than Hugh Kenner transcribed “red / (of beni)” as “red / (of berry)” because he didn’t know that beni means “rouge” in Japanese, is the fault truly Fenollosa’s for not having better handwriting?

“To be sure,” the editor dryly remarks, “it also helps to know some Chinese when attempting to copy lecture notes on Chinese poetry, and a little Japanese if the notetaker was studying in Japan.” Billings’s paragraphs on the faux pas compounded by other critics—sometimes the misreading of one becoming the basis for another’s errant speculations—are the saddest and most hilarious in the book.

The great revelation of this critical edition is that Pound, though not an impeccable translator, made few outright mistakes. His artistic choices can be quarreled with, his poetic license withheld when due for renewal; but, however often he pushed license to the limit, he made only a smattering of boneheaded errors—and even some of those might be called artistry. (One scholar could find only eight actual slips in “The Seafarer,” a poem often reviled by academe.) Pound saw advantage in what I once called the “right wrong word.” He’s sometimes guilty of the genius of mistake, but forcing translation into new territory prevents it from being sealed in the tomb of the scholar’s dullness.

A good translation is like brokering a trade deal between hostile neighbors, a great one like waging a war. In the century of translation since Cathay, a century fruitfully and even madly encouraging to translators who knew not a scrap of the language with which they were wrestling, there have been few major successes. (Later homophonic translations, like the absurdist renderings of Catullus by Louis and Celia Zukofsky, have often been rather nutty.) None has been so perfect, not in but because of its inadequacy, than Cathay. None has given readers such direct access, however imperfect, to an alien world. Pound’s dreams of eighth-century China may have been no more accurate than his fantasies of twelfth-century Périgord—but neither were anyone else’s.

Poets do not become themselves all at once. They proceed crabwise, by small advances and reversals, and their gifts come into focus through the cryptic, piecemeal evolution described by Stephen Jay Gould as punctuated equilibrium. “The Seafarer” in 1911 was one kind of advance;
“In a Station of the Metro,” finished the following year, another; but the subtle artistry in scenes of complaint and affection, of doubt and consequence in “The River-Merchant’s Wife: A Letter,” “Song of the Bowmen of Shu,” “Lament of the Frontier Guard,” “Exile’s Letter,” and other poems in Cathay were a great leap toward the broad sweep of history, the clatter of different tongues, the painterly landscapes and spotlit details that marked his poetry ever after. Cathay showed how to let one world be penetrated by the literature of another, the driving mechanism behind The Cantos. The poet who emerged from the Chinese poems was not yet whole; but the Pound of 1910 and that of 1920 would hardly have recognized each other, and Cathay was largely responsible.

What if Mrs. Fenollosa had returned to America after her husband’s death and laid his papers to rest in a dusty archive? What if Pound had departed for France in 1912, not 1920, and remained a latterday medievalist, still raging against the Georgians? What if Harriet Monroe’s letter late in 1912 inviting Pound to submit to the fledgling Poetry had been lost, and Pound never become the magazine’s truffle hunter for new talent? What if he’d then missed meeting Frost in 1913, who without Pound’s goading might have continued in the vein of A Boy’s Will, becoming no more than a minor New England pastoralist? What if the assassination of the Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo had failed in 1914, and the Great War been postponed? What if, not meeting Pound, Eliot had settled in at Oxford and, the war not preventing it, returned to America to defend his Ph.D. dissertation and become a professor of philosophy at Harvard? Perhaps from time to time he would have written a few quatrains about the odd characters of South Boston but never married Vivienne Haigh-Wood, never suffered neurasthenic collapse, never written The Waste Land. What if, without Pound’s Imagist poems, without Eliot to rail against, Williams had done no more than scribble occasional juvenilia on his prescription pad, remaining a small-town obstetrician? The Modernist wildfire might have burnt itself out, or never begun.

Timothy Billings has given us a stunning, masterful edition of a book that reinvented two worlds and made modern poetry possible.

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William Logan’s new collection of criticism, Broken Ground: Poetry and the Demon of History, will be published this spring by Columbia University Press.

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